

Year B Proper 28 13<sup>th</sup> October 2024

Exodus 3: 1-6, 1 Thessalonians 6: 12-24, Matthew 7: 1-12

## **Oh no! Prayer...**

Today I am giving the second of four sermons on the theme of prayer. That one word, prayer, may make your heart sink, or make you start to yawn, or wonder what on earth we could say that would take four weeks to cover this subject.

I sympathise with you. There was a time when I thought prayer was sitting crossed legged at primary school in the assembly hall reciting the Lord's Prayer. I had learnt it by rote and didn't engage with the words and what they meant at all.

And yet, here I am over fifty years later talking about prayer and hopefully doing so with some of the zeal of a convert!

Our readings today are not those assigned for this week in the revised common lectionary but are my personal choice, to help explain some things about prayer, from my perspective.

And it will not have passed your notice that I am probably not the most contemplative priest in the Diocese. I confess to constantly struggling with getting the balance right between action and contemplation.

Firstly, let me explore the three readings I have chosen. The reading from Exodus was where Moses is tending a flock of sheep on the side of Mount Horeb. He saw a bush burning but not being consumed. As he drew closer God told him to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground. Now, this was Mount Horeb, understood to be the mountain of God, but it was rough scrubby ground with sparse vegetation that his sheep were eating. Not much different from many other mountain sides I have clambered up whilst bagging Munros. This passage is a reminder that we can meet with God anywhere, not just in church. In fact, all ground is holy ground, because God is in everything and God is available everywhere. God is not far away. You do not have to crane your head to search the skies or shout up to a distant heaven. God is dwelling within each one of us, and is also all around us.

The second reading is from Paul's first letter to the people of the church in Thessalonica. He gives good advice for being a faithful and loving community. He then says, amongst other things, that they must pray without ceasing. Wow! That is some advice, and hardly practical you would have thought. But, depending on how you understand prayer, it may well be possible. We shall come to this shortly.

The third reading is a wonderful section from Matthew's gospel where Jesus is giving some clear guidance and advice to his disciples about how they should behave, especially their tendency to be judgemental. The shocking section comes from verse 7 onwards. It seems to imply that we can ask for whatever we want and it will be given to us, in some form or another. "When you ask, you receive, everyone who searches finds, and everyone who knocks will find that the door opens". Jesus illustrates this by asking if we would give a stone rather than bread to our child, would we give a snake rather than a tasty fish to them? Clearly, even evil people will give their children good gifts, and that is what God will offer to his children. Finally, this section ends with the simplest of rules to follow, the 'Golden Rule', namely, 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.'

Let me bring these three readings together.

Firstly, we can pray to God wherever we are. All of the earth is holy ground. The moment we choose to be receptive to God, that place become sacred and holy. It could be a mountain top, but it could equally be a bus stop, a car park, the safe refuge of a bathroom, a quiet corner of a room at home, somewhere on your dog walk, or wherever. Undoubtedly some places – like this beautiful church, feel soaked in prayer can make the act of praying seem easier.

Secondly, how are we supposed to pray without ceasing! I think there is a way we can do this, so long as we understand that prayer is not solely the act of us sending our petitions up to God, what I like to think of as being in 'transmit' mode. Quite often my prayer is being open to receive God's word for and to me, being in 'receive' mode, so to speak. Sometimes a prayer can be, 'What am I being asked to do here?', 'How should I respond to this person?' and sometimes it is just being aware of the little nudges from God, rather than remaining oblivious to them. A dearly beloved priest I knew said in his curacy he learnt that God spoke to him by a name flitting through his mind. Instead of

thinking he must go and see that person some time, he started responding by prioritising his time to see that person, only to frequently find that his visit was most timely and needed. Coincidence perhaps? No, guided and prompted by God, but up to us to listen and respond.

Thirdly, is it true that Matthew's gospel has Jesus saying pray and ask for absolutely anything you like and you will get it? That clearly doesn't happen. Some of my most fervent prayers have not delivered my desired results. Jesus was speaking to his disciples and the context was asking for aspects of God's kingdom to come to earth.

And what about the action of prayer itself? What is the point if when I ask God to stop something terrible from happening, nothing seems to change? Could it be that prayer does not always work that way? Could it be that the words of our prayers, the utterances that reflect the desires of our heart, are to be heard by us and are meant to challenge us? To ask us, as Christ's hands and feet in this world, what we are going to do about the very thing we are expecting God to do?

I have found prayer challenging for that very reason. Praying about a person has often led me to realise I need to visit that person and see what I can do to help. Praying about the situation in the Middle East has led me to find out more about the issues pertaining to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, and to financially support Medical Aid for Palestinians. It has also led me to become a Guardian of the Memory of a Jew killed in the holocaust in World War 2, His name is Nicolas Zelikovics, born on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1922 and killed in Auschwitz on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1942.

And finally, as the Lord's Prayer states, when we ask for action to be taken which aligns with bringing God's kingdom down to earth, it tends to be answered in some way; maybe not how we thought, and maybe involving us when we hoped that by praying for something we could wash our hands of the issue and get on with the next task...

There are many types of prayer – this sermon was never going to cover the types there are. But hopefully you will see that whether you petition God, sit with God in silence in a room with a candle a cross, or allow time in your day to not just 'transmit' but also to be sensitive to 'receive' from God, they are all valid forms of prayer. And you will know, for me, prayer walking – where the

natural rhythm of breathing and walking is where I can still my mind and most often find God speaking to me.

Where might God speak to you? Where has God spoken to you? Did you know it was God? Was it just a random passing thought that made you choose to do something different, something that brought a wee glimpse of God's kingdom into the life of another child of God?

A book I have is called, 'Breathing, I Pray' by Ivan Mann, who was Warden of the College of the Holy Spirit on Cumbrae. Breathing, I Pray is probably the most realistic statement of how we can live our lives. We just need to be aware of it and listen for the voice of God.